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SUBJECT: CHARGE'S PRESS CONFERENCE ELICITS INTEREST OF  
INDEPENDENT MEDIA, GOB COMPLAINTS

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¶1. (U) On August 31, Charge hosted a press conference with members of the Belarusian independent media and local representatives of various international media outlets. After delivering a brief opening statement, Charge and journalists engaged in a spirited hour-long question-and-answer session on a wide range of issues. See para 3 for the text of the opening statement. [Note: The full transcript of the press conference will be sent separately to EUR/UMB when available. End note.]

¶2. (SBU) In quick response to the press conference, MFA U.S. Affairs head Sergey Sergeyev called in Charge on September 5 to hand-deliver a diplomatic note on the GOB's deep concern with the "disrespectful and unfriendly nature" of Charge's recent statements. See para 4 for an unofficial translation of the diplomatic note. [Comment: Sergeyev restricted his oral remarks to the points raised in the diplomatic note and, as usual, conveyed the clear impression he was only "delivering the mail." End comment.]

¶3. (SBU) Charge assured Sergeyev he would share the GOB's concerns with the Department, noting that his calls for the immediate release of all political prisoners closely adhere to U.S. policy, including the Department's press statement of August 4. Sergeyev asked Charge to reconcile his statements on the unlikelihood of U.S. sanctions applied against Belarus and the provisions of the latest draft version of the Belarus Democracy Reauthorization Act (BDRA). Charge explained that the State Department has not yet formally reviewed the draft legislation. He added that there are no current plans to introduce economic sanctions. However, Charge encouraged Sergeyev to focus more on the clear sentiment underlying the BDRA, which is growing frustration with the GOB on the continued deterioration of democratic freedoms in Belarus.

Press Conference Statement

¶4. (U) Charge d'Affaires Jonathan Moore held a roundtable August 31 at the American Center in Minsk with members of Belarusian independent media and local representatives of various international media outlets. In an hour-long question-and-answer session, Mr. Moore addressed issues spanning from the upcoming municipal elections in Belarus to private American investment in Belarus. The Charge delivered an opening statement prior to the roundtable. The statement is quoted in full below:

"Thank you for joining us today. My colleagues and I look forward to answering your questions and having an open, on-the-

record discussion.

I arrived in Minsk on July 25 as Deputy Chief of Mission, and have been Charge d'Affaires since August 1. I am pleased to note that Ambassador Karen Stewart plans to arrive in Minsk on September 18, and our dialogue with the independent media will continue under her leadership.

It is no secret that our relations with Belarus are difficult. The United States has no desire to isolate the people of Belarus. However, we cannot support the policies of the current regime, including persistent disrespect for international standards of democracy and human rights. Belarusians have every right to the same freedoms and opportunities found elsewhere in Europe. In Belarus, persons who have raised legitimate concerns about the nature of the regime over the past twelve years have lost their jobs, their freedom, and their lives. Democracy is not a perfect process; Americans know that very well. Many of our country's citizens were denied basic rights and freedoms for much of our history. But recognizing that fact about ourselves helps us recognize that fact about others.

The United States continues to call upon the regime to release all political prisoners unconditionally. In that regard, I would like to note that our requests for access to Aleksandr Kozulin, Nikolay Astreiko, and Timofey Dranchuk remain unapproved. On August 30, I visited the Volodarskiy jail to see them, and was told that permission had not been granted. We will continue to seek access to them.

In free countries, the people and the media control the state. It is the opinion of my government that in Belarus the opposite is true. You, as members of the independent media, have an essential role in objectively informing the people of Belarus about themselves, their government, and the freedoms that have been denied them. Thank you again for being here with us today. I welcome your questions."

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Diplomatic Note

15. (U) Begin Text:

(Complimentary opening)

During the press conference on August 31, 2006, Charge d'Affaires a.i. of the United States Jonathan Moore made a number of unfounded and unacceptable remarks and allegations in regard to the leadership and people of Belarus.

The statement of the Charge d'Affaires is in obvious disaccord with the support for the course of the country's leadership the majority of Belarusians demonstrated at the presidential election on March 19, 2006.

The ultimatums he put forward not only run contrary to reality but constitute an attempt at intervening in the internal affairs of Belarus and manifest disrespect toward the law of the host country.

In addition, the allegations voiced in relation to the hot air balloon incident in Belarusian airspace bear evidence of either lack of information or purposeful distortion by the Charge d'Affaires of the conclusions made by the international commission that investigated the incident in question.

Such statements are of openly expressed disrespectful and unfriendly nature, and do not contribute to the establishment of trust between the United States of America and the Republic of Belarus.

The Ministry wishes to bring to the attention of the American side the fact that it is unacceptable for diplomatic agents accredited in the Republic of Belarus to make such remarks, and

calls on the American side to base the relations between our countries exclusively on the principles of mutual respect.

(Complimentary closing)

End Text.

Moore